

Teaching About Language in the Primary Years

Rebecca Bunting

A **David Fulton** Book

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Second Edition

Rebecca Bunting

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1997 by David Fulton Publishers

This edition published 2012 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-85346-667-0

ISBN 13: 978-1-853-46667-0 (pbk)

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Typeset by FiSH Books, London

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Preface

This book is for teachers and student teachers who are interested in language, in children's understanding of language and in the teacher's role in developing children's knowledge about language.

It suggests activities for the primary classroom which help children to look at language, at how it is used and how it works. It contextualises the approaches underpinning these activities so that their intentions and purposes are made clear.

The book is a contribution to the ongoing and controversial debate about what children need to know about language, a debate which gained momentum in the 1980s and which has since been shaped and driven by government reports on English teaching, successive versions of the National Curriculum for English and, more recently, the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). In addition, many of the linguistic terms and concepts discussed here in an educational context are current requirements in relation to teachers' knowledge and understanding of the subject of English.

Many of the students and teachers I meet professionally feel that they have very little knowledge about language, although they invariably know more than they realise. The requirements for the award of qualified teacher status, as specified in DfEE Circular 4/98, set challenging targets for knowledge about language. The teaching of grammar causes most anxiety and it is this issue which usually grabs the headlines when English teaching is in the news. Understanding about the grammatical forms of English is an important aspect of language knowledge, but it is not the only one and not the most important one. This book discusses the arguments about teaching grammar and places this aspect of knowledge about language in a primary years framework, particularly the later primary years when, on the whole, children are operating more independently in language. This wider framework involves a recognition of the functions of language and the importance of context.

Debates about what to teach children about language may sometimes seem more relevant to secondary school than to primary, particularly when grammar is seen as the only knowledge about language worth having. It has been argued that children in the primary years should not be encumbered by the need to

learn about language, because they have yet to gain full control over reading and writing, and competence must precede reflection. However, I would argue that learning to use language and learning about language are not separate processes but are integrated and interrelated. Teachers and children need to engage in regular discussions about language, so that the children develop a questioning attitude to language and see talking about language as relevant and interesting. The NLS now brings this issue into sharp focus.

It is in the primary years that children's interest in and awareness of language can be most readily fostered. Learning about language gives children the analytical tools with which to test, judge, critique and question the language they encounter, so that they can understand how it is used, its meanings and intentions. To do this, children will need some terminology for talking about, describing and explaining aspects of language; the knowledge and enthusiasm of the teacher will be crucial in creating appropriate contexts through which such learning can come about.

In this way, a rich culture of talk about language will be created. Talking about language will become a normal and regular part of classroom life, not an exception and certainly not limited or constrained to brief timetabled slots in the curriculum.

This second edition makes selective reference to the requirements of the NLS, which was implemented in primary schools in England and Wales in September 1998. At the time of writing, plans are being drawn up to extend the strategy into the early years of secondary education. The document governing these literacy developments, the Framework for Teaching, lists what children must be taught in each term of their primary schooling, including the Reception year. It establishes a pedagogy for teaching which is unprecedented in our educational history.

These requirements will be considered in terms of what the NLS says about teaching about language – that is, what children are expected to know about language, not simply their implicit competence in using language which is the strategy's prime purpose.

This book is in two parts. Part One, Language, Language Education and Linguistics, proposes a model for learning about language. Part Two, Language Activities, suggests a wide range of approaches to developing children's understandings about language.

The Glossary contains brief explanations of key linguistic terms. These are in **bold** throughout the text where fuller explanations of some of them may be found.

Rebecca Bunting
Chelmsford
August 2000

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is made to the following for permission to use copyright material:

'Ten Tall Oaktrees', from *A Mouse in my Roof* by Richard Edwards, first published in the UK by Orchard Books, a division of the Watts Publishing Group, 96 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4RH; the folk tale, 'The Baker's Daughter', from *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* by Alison Lurie, a scrambled version of which is reproduced by permission of Reed Consumer Books, London and The Melanie Jackson Agency, New York; 'The Writer of this Poem' by Roger McGough, reproduced by permission of Peters Fraser and Dunlop Group Ltd on behalf of Roger McGough; two short extracts from *George's Marvellous Medicine* by Roald Dahl, published by Cape, reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates on behalf of the author's estate.

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PART 1

Language, Language Education and Linguistics

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Chapter 1

Principles of language study

A LITTLE HISTORY

Two negatives make a positive, so you must never say *I didn't do nothing*.
Never start a sentence with *and* or *but*, or finish one with a preposition.
There is no such word as *ain't*.

This is me talking to my class when I first began teaching English. I made these pronouncements, and many just like them, with the best of intentions – I wanted the children to do well and progress in English, and particularly in their writing. I wanted to help them to understand some of the conventions and to ensure that they used grammatically correct forms in their written work. I recognised that even though these were conventions of changing usage and not laws cast in stone for all time, conventions do come to be seen as rules and I felt that, since people conformed to these rules, I had to ensure that the children could understand them and use them, so that they would become proficient language users. We did some exercises designed to improve specific aspects of their writing. They learned how to identify main and subordinate clauses, and they happily filled in gaps and spotted grammatical mistakes in passages I gave them.

I knew these rules because I myself had been taught them at school and now it was my turn to pass them on. I believed that this was what English teachers were supposed to do. Somewhere there existed accepted standards of written and spoken language, and I expected my class to aspire to and achieve those standards. I believed my role was to keep out all corrupting influences (such as the way they spoke at home), to correct the incorrect and make perfect the imperfect. Although at that point I had not read the Newbolt Report, *The Teaching of English in England* (HMSO 1921), or even heard of it actually, my attitudes and approaches are signalled there:

The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against the powerful influences of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street. (p. 59)

Children's language experiences and expertise from outside school were considered to be dangerous and to impede what schools were trying to do. The

language children brought into school from home was seen as a dirty habit, as debased and evil. The teacher's role was to compensate for these bad influences from home. The use of the word 'evil' and the sense of moral opprobrium in this quotation is shocking to us today.

We can compare this with a quotation from a very influential report published 54 years later, *A Language for Life*, known as the Bullock Report (DES 1975), initially commissioned by the then Secretary of State, Margaret Thatcher, to advise on the teaching of reading, but actually including all aspects of language development in its remit. Here we can see a change in attitude to the language children bring to school and to the status of non-standard dialects of English.

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold and the curriculum should reflect these aspects of his life. (para 20.5)

Although it was referring to the needs of what were called 'overseas' children, the report marked the beginnings of a recognition of the value of every child's home culture. We can trace the influence of such beliefs in the report of the National Curriculum English Working Group, *English For Ages 5-16*, (DES 1989) known as the Cox Report, where there is a clear recognition of the political complexities of this educational issue and the potential psychological trauma for children who are made to change the way they speak. As Cox (1991) later argued:

Teaching Standard English demands great sensitivity from the teacher. It is dangerous to tell a 5-year-old girl or boy that his or her mother uses language incorrectly. Adolescents are going to be embarrassed and ashamed if a teacher suggests that their dialect, which is part of their identity, must be radically changed. (p. 33)

Although the authors of both the Bullock and the Cox reports demonstrate greater sensitivity to the needs of the child and to the political and cultural implications of outlawing the child's natural speech than was evident in 1921, the extent to which these reports influenced the attitudes of parents, politicians and others outside the teaching profession is open to question. The belief that non-standard English equates with *bad* English has prevailed and the best efforts of linguists and teachers have not significantly changed public attitudes. As a beginning teacher, I didn't blame the children for not being able to write as well as I wanted them to. I approached my teaching and marking with missionary zeal, repelling a split infinitive (Star Trek was only just establishing its cult status, so the split infinitive had not really come to people's attention: one was yet to boldly go anywhere) and fending off a 'lend/borrow' or a 'teach/learn' mistake with my trusty bible, the dictionary.

My purpose was to teach the children *explicitly* about the forms of written Standard English so that they would use this knowledge to improve their writing skills. I wanted to teach them how to use language, what was allowed and what

forbidden. I was acting as editor of all their work, making it better. I was also trying to give the children, at least minimally, a language for talking about language – **metalinguage**. This involved teaching them the names of the parts of speech and I would try to enliven this by playing ‘spot the adverb’ in a poem, or ‘underline all the prepositions’. Using their mental checklist in English tests and examinations, the children would write ‘There are no adverbs of time in this passage’ and I would feel a glow of pride.

I did come to realise that I didn’t know enough about whether there was a relationship between knowing about language and being able to use it appropriately and effectively. I also realised that spoken language and written language, though sharing many similarities, differ grammatically; that there is a complex relationship between spoken language and written language; and that I was not accounting for this. Did children actually write as they spoke, as so many people seemed to be arguing at the time? Well, yes and no. How could I talk about this with the children? What was my role here? Did knowledge of grammar apply only to writing or was there a connection with reading? Was knowledge about grammar all there was to know about language? And (never start a sentence with ‘and’) most significantly, I realised that all my proscribing of their language was not encouraging the children in their development as writers: if anything I was impeding their creativity and skill. I watched as they rubbed holes in their paper in an effort to get something right and ended up writing hardly anything at all. How could I deal with this? Teaching children about language was an uphill struggle.

This brief autobiographical vignette comes not from the 1950s as you might have thought but from the early 1980s. I don’t think it is unusual or exceptional. I was taking my place in a tradition of English-language teaching which had a long history, largely because I did not know any other way. What I knew most about was not linguistics but literature, because I had studied that at university. I was not well-equipped to teach language.

I doubt that many children developed a lasting interest in language as a result of my teaching, though many of them would carry the rules uncritically around with them and no doubt pass them on to their own children. When I look back on my language teaching I see myself as a fond Mrs Chips, graciously smiling, a tear in my eye, on all the generations of children who had come under my influence. Or perhaps it was more like Chinese whispers, with the message becoming more and more mangled?

LAY AND PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES: THE GREAT GRAMMAR DEBATE

In my teaching of English I treated language as a fixed system with rules to be learned and applied. I focused on the forms of language, usually the written forms, and on standard written English. I assumed that if children learned certain rules, they would become better users of language. I assumed that without this explicit knowledge, there could be no real fluency or quality of expression in

writing. In other words, I took for granted that to be competent, you need to know first how the thing (language) works, that to know how it works and to make it work requires a knowledge of the internal mechanisms, in this case the grammar of the English language. This is a belief often uncritically expounded whenever questions about deteriorating standards of literacy are raised. The argument goes that if standards are declining, it must be because teachers are not teaching grammar: it assumes that there is a direct causal relation between competence in writing and knowledge of grammar.

The analogous counter-argument which is frequently marshalled is that we do not need to know precisely how a car works in order to drive it. Nor do we need to understand the physiology of the human balance mechanism, or the workings of gears, in order to ride a bicycle. However, for many people, it is only in driving a car that they become interested at all in how one works, and then only so far, just enough to satisfy a particular need. This may be especially true when something goes wrong. Drivers do not need specialist engineering knowledge, but there are some things they may need to know in certain circumstances, or are interested in knowing purely for interest's sake.

To take this analogy into language, being able to use language with pleasure and some success may bring about an interest in how language works, but knowledge of how it works is certainly not a prerequisite for fluency and is not the main element in teaching effective writing. One of the problems is that there is little research evidence to draw on because the relation of children's knowledge about grammar to their proficiency in language has received relatively little attention. What evidence there is seems to be flawed, and as David Tomlinson (1994) argues, many of the studies turn out to be little more than polemic:

They (researchers and supervisors) are usually so convinced in their own minds that grammar teaching is pointless that, as long as the research findings are consonant with their opinions, they do not look closely at how those findings are obtained. (p. 20)

Tomlinson was asked to submit a paper to the National Curriculum Council. His summary of that paper is to be found in *English in Education* (Tomlinson 1994). This paper reports his investigation of two influential and much cited research projects on the teaching of formal grammar, one an MEd dissertation and the other a PhD thesis, neither of which was formally published and both of which, he argues, are methodologically flawed. The main question he raises relates to the meaning of 'formal grammar teaching', which both researchers claimed to be investigating: Does it mean the formal teaching of grammar, or the teaching of formal grammar?

In the more significant piece of research of the two (Harris 1962), secondary school children across five London schools were given formal grammar lessons, using a traditional textbook; their written compositions were assessed and then compared with a control group ostensibly taught no grammar, but which did